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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1562
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5046
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8644
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6213
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1871
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4066
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2031
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000783

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: MAKING ENDS MEET IN THE DELTA

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Classified By: P/E Chief Jennifer Harhigh for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

1. (C) CDA and Embassy officers visited Kyone Hla and San Khan Chaung villages in Labutta Township in Burma's cyclone-affected Irrawaddy delta September 23. Beneficiaries of agricultural livelihood projects being implemented by International Development Enterprises (IDE) and funded by USAID/OFDA expressed gratitude for USG assistance and urged more. The villagers described in detail their experiences during the cyclone and their struggles to survive in the aftermath. They reported that they have finished planting the monsoon season rice crop (which they expect to harvest in December) and that they are surviving largely on humanitarian rations supplemented by locally-caught seafood, and when necessary leftover rotten rice from the previous year's crop. We observed rice growing in the villages, as well as rebuilt thatch houses and temporary schools. Despite further endangering those living a hand-to-mouth existence, Nargis may be leading to improved local networking and increased access to outside information. In comment, we note that prospects for continued, even expanded donor assistance are unclear. Some regime ministers seem favorably disposed; Senior General Than Shwe reportedly has no such intention. End summary.

Painful memories of Nargis persist

2. (C) CDA and Embassy officers traveled by WFP helicopter and local boat to San Khan Chaung and Kyone Hla villages September 23. We observed agricultural livelihood projects being implemented by IDE-Myanmar, an NGO implementing a USD 3.9 million grant from USAID/OFDA for agriculture, livelihoods and market recovery activities in the Irrawaddy Delta. IDE Country Director Debbie Aung Din Taylor told us IDE chose to work with the "second band" of Nargis survivors, i.e. those in areas that have a decent chance of recovery with agricultural assistance, vice the villages closer to the ocean where full recovery may not ever be possible.

13. (C) In San Khan Chaung, which has approximately 84 families (total population of 360), villagers told us that 32 people had died and all but three houses had been damaged or destroyed. Only six bodies have been recovered. In Kyone Hla, with 142 families (total population of 500-600), 68 villagers perished. In both villages, nearly all of the houses, the schools and the monasteries had been destroyed or severely damaged.

14. (C) In San Khan Chaung, a fifty-year-old village, residents told us they were warned of the approaching storm via radio four days in advance but had never experienced a cyclone before and thus did not know what to do to prepare. Survivors recounted how during the height of the cyclone they had clung to trees in pitch dark from 8 p.m. until 3 p.m. until the storm surge receded.

15. (C) When we asked what they were doing to prepare for future such storms, they replied that they were doing nothing other than stocking water containers to use as flotation devices and buying more radios in order to listen to weather forecasts. (Note: We were told that when rumors surfaced of another impending storm last week, village residents from several villages flocked to Labutta town to seek shelter. End note.) The villagers said it had taken the government 4-5 days to arrive at the village post-cyclone and they acknowledged receiving rice from the government. In the interim, they survived by eating wet (and often rotten) rice they managed to salvage from the previous year's harvest.

A precarious existence at best

16. (C) Existence in both villages was precarious to begin

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with and has been further compounded by Nargis. Well over 50 percent of villagers, maybe even 70 percent, were landless before the storm and had struggled to find work as day laborers or doing odd jobs. They had particular trouble finding work during the dry season. One woman who works as the village seamstress, noted that business is extremely slow and she could not earn enough to support her family. Access to capital is severely constrained and, with high interest rates from local lenders (10-12 percent per month, compounded), many villagers are saddled with inescapable debt.

17. (C) Both villages we visited plant only one rice crop per year, during the monsoon season. Villagers told us they have managed to plant this year's post-cyclone, monsoon rice crop successfully. The salt had drained out of the soil. Farmers lost most of their draft animals in the storm, and the government has not provided replacement livestock. Twenty-four farmers planted the monsoon crop in one village's 611 acres of rice paddy using the remaining 40 head of cattle and donated power tillers, five provided by the GOB and one by IDE. When asked, they said the GOB tillers required frequent repair. We did observe healthy-looking rice paddies in the areas we visited.

Despite poor diet, health concerns limited

18. (C) When asked about diet, villagers in San Khan Chaung said they had received food rations including rice, oil and salt from WFP but the rations have been inconsistent. Because the rations alone are insufficient, people have supplemented their diet with damaged rice. Village women told us in both villages that twice daily meals of rice include locally-caught fish or shrimp 2-3 times per week. Children are being fed rice and palm sugar.

19. (C) According to the villagers, health concerns always include malaria and the flu but there have been no major outbreaks of disease. Both villages reported international

health NGOs including Doctors Without Borders (Holland) and Merlin visit regularly.

School's back in session

¶10. (C) The houses we observed have all been rebuilt, often from salvaged scraps of wood and palm fronds. Efforts are also underway to rebuild monasteries and other structures that were destroyed or severely damaged by the storm and its accompanying wave. We observed the crumbled brick-and-mortar remains of San Khan Chaung's village school and visited a makeshift school in a rebuilt house nearby. Nearly 100 students, ranging in age from 5-10 sat closely together on mats and took notes in UNICEF-donated notebooks on UNICEF and GOB texts. The school appeared well-organized and its two uniformed teachers appeared professional. When we asked students if they were still frightened by storms, they yelled out "we're scared" in unison immediately.

¶11. (C) In Kyone Hla, where the school was also destroyed, students were attending school in UNICEF-donated tents, although villagers observed that the students have to take frequent breaks because the donated tarps are extremely hot, not conducive to the tropics. Students start the school day at 10 a.m. after helping their families with field work and chores.

The silver lining...

¶12. (C) Although we lack a baseline for comparison, it appears Nargis has forced villagers to organize in new ways, creating a wider base for civil society. For example, power tiller committees in both villages must make transparent and fair decisions as to which families use the donated tillers on which days. In another positive development, Nargis

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inadvertently has prompted villagers to seek outside news and information. In Kyone Hla village, we were told 80 percent of residents now have radios in their homes versus 40 percent previously. This is not due to donations. Villagers are buying radios themselves in order to hear weather forecasts. When we asked what they listened to, villagers listed Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, among other stations.

Despite minders, villagers spoke frankly

¶13. (C) Although we were granted full access to visit both villages and were never asked to show identification or our travel permission letter, Burma Police Special Branch officers observed our meetings with villagers. We did not notice an obvious minder in San Khan Chaung village but discovered later through MFA contacts that SB had (incorrectly) reported we were disparaging the GOB's constitutional referendum while asking questions about ability to vote. During our session with villagers in Kyone Hla, the Special Branch 'guest' was more obvious, noticeably better dressed and with a digital camera. Despite our apparent minders, villagers replied frankly to our questions, although the conversation in San Khan Chaung seemed more uninhibited. A villager in Kyone Hla mentioned afterward on the walk to the helicopter that conversation there would have been more uninhibited if SB had been absent.

¶14. (C) Villagers in both places are clearly concerned with basic survival rather than political matters. They seemed genuinely confused when we attempted to ask if they had voted in May's referendum, although they later claimed to have voted in a nearby town. In both villages the men initially sat up front and did the talking; but when it came to matters of family diet and livelihoods, women quickly shuffled forward to share their views. Villagers told us their impression of the U.S. is that of a rich and powerful

country. They thanked us profusely for USG and other donor assistance and said they would welcome more.

Comment

¶15. (C) It is no surprise that, four months after Cyclone Nargis, memories are still fresh for residents of Kyone Hla, San Khan Chaung and numerous other villages in the delta. An already precarious existence was made even worse when Nargis surged through, taking lives and destroying livelihoods. Humanitarian needs in the delta remain staggering.

Country-wide, Burma's people face tremendous vulnerabilities.

A saving grace is that the Burmese people are incredibly resilient. In addition, villagers have demonstrated the ability to band together in a variety of informal mechanisms in order to survive. Donor assistance, even in the basic "relief" phase in the delta, is tapping into and encouraging organizational skills which should build capacity for a brighter future.

¶16. (C) An open question is how much scope the current regime in Nay Pyi Taw will allow for donor activity once the "relief" phase is over in the delta, and whether the regime will allow any opening to extend more broadly throughout Burma. Reportedly some ministers who have been able to observe the benefits of donor activity directly are signaling interest in having such activity continue and even expand. On the other hand, a diplomat presenting credentials last week to Senior General Than Shwe told us when he asked about continuing prospects for donor assistance relating to Nargis, the response was curt: that the relief phase has ended and Burma was moving on.

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